



CORZINE'S FAST CLIMB

By **DAVID REBOVICH**

Visiting U.S. Senator Jon Corzine's offices on the eleventh floor of Newark's glistening Gateway Center, with their panoramic view of what seems like half of New Jersey, who wouldn't think, "Well, this guy is used to being on top." In Corzine's pre-Senate days as CEO of Goldman Sachs, that would certainly be true. But given the first termers' lack of prior political experience and the focus on his record-setting campaign spending in 2000, many folks here have been surprised, pleasantly so, by Corzine's meteoric rise to prominence in his party and on the national political scene.

Indeed, less than two years after being sworn in as a Senator, Corzine was asked by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle to chair the important Democratic Senate Campaign Committee (DSCC). This is an extraordinary responsibility for a newcomer to Washington. His selection to this post substantiates the opinion that many political veterans quickly developed about him, a view that probably doesn't get aired as much as it should here in New Jersey. That is, Corzine has a keen grasp of public policy issues, a deep commitment to his party's principles, and is adept at understanding and playing practical politics.

Corzine's quick maturation and ascent in his party could not have come at a better time for New Jersey's Democrats and, many here think, the entire state. After all, the combative and well-positioned Bob Torricelli - he headed the DSCC before Corzine - decided to give up his reelection bid last fall when it seemed clear he wouldn't win. The Republican-controlled national government is not expected to be especially attentive to a state that gave Al Gore a 16 percent victory in 2000, has seven Democrats in its thirteen member House delegation, and two Democratic Senators. To top it off, the highest ranking Republican from the Garden State in the Bush Administration, EPA Administrator Christie Whitman, has resigned her post. At least Representative Bob Menendez is chair of the Democratic Caucus in the

House, making him the third ranking member of his party in that chamber.

Not that Corzine and his new colleague, once and again Senator Frank Lautenberg are badly placed in the Senate. Lautenberg sits on the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, which deals with Amtrak, the Coast Guard and highway safety. Corzine was renamed to the Banking and Budget committees and placed on the prestigious Foreign Relations Committee. These assignments take advantage of his expertise and experience in finance, investment and the global economy gained during his years on Wall Street. And they enable him to address issues important to New Jersey, a state whose economic well-being hinges on a healthy stock market and stable international scene.

But it's the chairmanship of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee that really gives Corzine an opportunity to assert himself and influence his party's political strategy and policy agenda. In the same post Torricelli distinguished himself by raising millions and helping Democrats earn a tie and then a 50 to 49 advantage in the Senate after the 2000 election. When Corzine succeeded him, some observers assumed that the former CEO would use his contacts in the business world to help fill party coffers. However, campaign finance rules have changed in a way that will require Corzine to focus more on increasing the number of donors who can kick in up to \$2,000 rather than to seek large donations. He promises a businesslike approach to this endeavor and cites the success of New Jersey's Democrats in raising funds from rank and file members as a good example to follow.

Make no mistake, as 2004 - a presidential election year - approaches, the Democrats will need every penny they can raise to be competitive against the Republicans. Pres. George W. Bush is expected to break his own fundraising records and along the way help his fellow Republicans try to hold on to their control of the Senate and House. Corzine will thus be expected to raise millions, but he will also help Democrats develop a strategy and message.

An important part of strategy is recruiting quality candidates. For starters, two incumbents - Ernest Hollings of South Carolina and Zell Miller of Georgia - may not seek reelection in 2004. Both represent states where Bush won by double digits in 2000 and expects to do well their next year as well. Two other Democratic incumbents, John Edwards of North Carolina and Bob Graham of Florida, are seeking their party's nomination for president. If either wins the nomination, the Democrats will need a quality replacement to run for Senate.

Faced with a difficult task - the Democrats have to defend 19 Senate seats, the Republicans only 15 -, Corzine claims not be fazed. He told me, "At this stage I feel good." His reasons for being optimistic? A main one is that it doesn't seem that Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York will have to face a strong challenge from

someone like Gov. George Pataki or Rudy Giuliani. What this could do is free up millions in donations that otherwise might have gone to Schumer's campaign but now may go to other Democrats seeking Senate seats or to the party. Corzine is also upbeat because he thinks, based on some preliminary work, that Democrats can attract quality Senate candidates in competitive states.

Corzine also believes that despite Pres. Bush's popularity, the 2004 presidential campaign is not shaped enough to speculate about its direction or outcome. The floundering economy and the Administration's inability to get it back on track are topics the Democrats certainly plan to discuss next year. And recent questions about inaccurate intelligence information driving the Administration's foreign and military policy can further sidetrack what Republicans were hoping to be a real Bush juggernaut complete with coattails.

Like most Democrats, Corzine recognizes the need for his party to define some cutting issues and clarify its message. For his part, the Senator has been out front with proposals about the economy and taxes, homeland security and health care. Last fall he laid a major alternative to the President's tax cut plan. Corzine argued that the top two tax rates should be frozen, not cut. The funds preserved could then be used for more immediate economic stimulus by providing a payroll tax holiday on the first \$10,000 of income, permanent marriage penalty and child tax credit reform, and some deductions for student loans. Regarding the action in Iraq and similar interventions, Corzine would prefer greater effort put into establishing multinational coalitions. He also wishes the Administration would pay more attention to North Korea as a hot spot and possible threat to international stability and peace.

Corzine has also been out front on two other issues important to New Jersey and the nation. For more than a year Corzine has been pushing hard for federal legislation to improve security and decrease risks at chemical plants. Anyone from New Jersey or who has traveled on the Turnpike, Corzine noted, would realize how important such security measures are to residents, transportation, and the economy. Along with Sen. Lautenberg, he has been lobbying hard for Medicare reform legislation that would allow New Jersey seniors to stay in the state's generous prescription drug program while providing over \$300 million in federal aid to help more seniors.

Such positions have reinforced Corzine's image as one of his party's leading liberals. He doesn't shy away from that label and instead insists that to be successful in 2004, Democrats must tend to their political base and provide clear policy alternatives to the Republicans. Critics who were once quick to dismiss Corzine as a wealthy eccentric, a liberal because he could "afford to be," have by and large backed off the last few years. That's no doubt because anyone who has spent time with the Senator at one of his many appearances at community meetings,

senior centers and schools across the state find it hard not to regard him as a thoughtful, principled and determined politician.

Indeed, in many ways the Jon Corzine who represents New Jersey in the U.S. Senate has shown himself to be that man portrayed in those endless television ads he ran in 2000 - a guy in a sport shirt who likes to rub elbows with average folks in diners and find out what's on their minds. In his two and half years in the Senate, Corzine is still rubbing elbows with New Jerseyans and now with his fellow lawmakers in Washington where he also talks calmly and rationally about policy issues. But as a Senator, Corzine has also shown that he's not averse to throwing a few elbows to make his case. As in business, in politics both techniques are often needed to enable you to get to the top where it is easier to help your constituents.

David P. Rebovich, Ph.D., is Managing Director of the Rider University Institute for New Jersey Politics (www.rider.edu/institute). He teaches courses in New Jersey Politics, Political Campaigning, Urban Politics, and Public Administration and is a commentator for several New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia media outlets. He also writes a regular column, "On Politics", for NEW JERSEY LAWYER.

[Back to PoliticsNJ.com Home](#)

January 16, 2002